

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

THE GUARDIAN

Marc-André Hamelin

Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh

August 5, 2009

★★★★★

It is a rare breed of pianists who prove their mettle in the hugely virtuosic music of Charles-Valentin Alkan. The French-Canadian Marc-André Hamelin is one of them, and his Snape Proms recital was constructed so as to climax with Alkan's massive *Symphonie* for the piano.

The rigour of Hamelin's approach was established at the outset, with two classical masterworks in the minor key to balance the final *Symphonie*'s four movements; these, like the whole set of Op39 studies to which it belongs, are all cast in the minor mode. Haydn's *Andante con Variazioni* in F minor was delivered with fastidious care, focusing not simply on subtle melodic inflection and brilliant elaboration, but on the inherent drama of the syncopation and the chromatic colour. Mozart's *Sonata* in A minor, K310, whose drama is equally potent, was less convincing, given the grand romantic treatment, with an almost sentimental pulling about of the tempo in the central *Andante*.

With Liszt's three pieces, *Venezia e Napoli*, began the buildup to the Alkan. What was remarkable here was Hamelin's use of the wonderful Maltings acoustic to explore the sonorities of Liszt, making abundantly clear both its impressionistic iridescence and the Wagnerian harmony. Fauré's 6th *Nocturne* was invested with a similarly rich resonance.

The seeming ease of Hamelin's formidable piano technique is itself riveting; but the combination of passion and insight he brought to the Alkan was exceptional, with moments of purity countered by colossal, though never overbearing, soundscapes. Hamelin's nonchalant encore was a nocturne of his own, a quietly understated homage to Alkan and his pyrotechnics; the fact that he, too, is a complete musician as well as a keyboard giant.

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